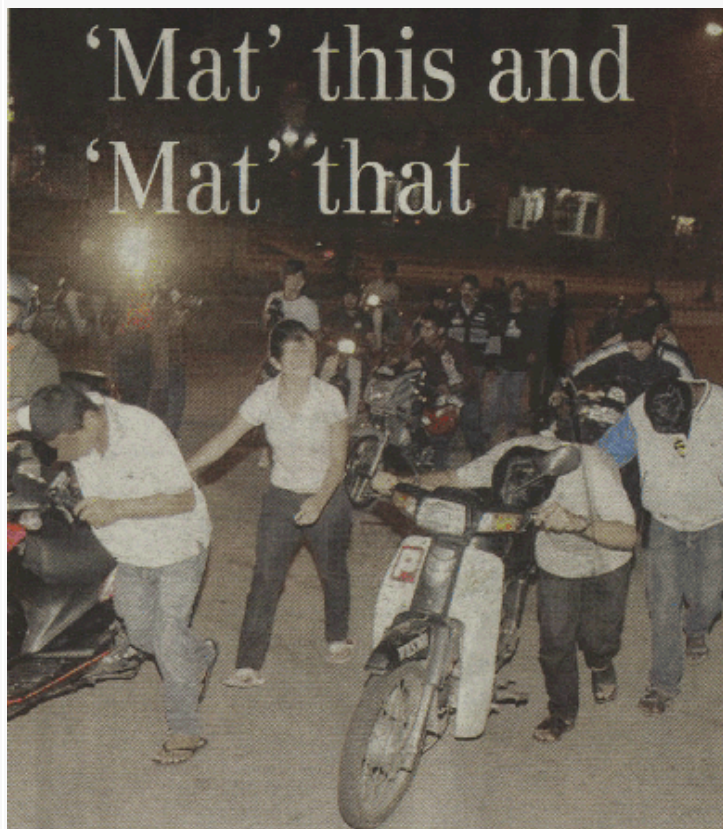


## 'Mat' this and 'Mat' that

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WE call the illegal motorcycle racers Mat Rempit. Such labelling of people is not new with Malaysians.

Forty years ago, Minah Karan was a popular monicker attributed to women workers in the electronic industry that was in its infancy in the country at the time.

The somewhat derogatory label referred to the tens of thousands of young and naive girls from the kampungs who were rooted out to serve as "cheap labour" in an industry viewed sceptically by many.

For the majority of the girls, this was the first time they were leaving home.

Economically, times were not good for many families back then and this was a chance to earn extra income.

They dreaded leaving home to face an uncertain future.

The availability of Minah Karan was one of the pull factors that convinced the foreign players to invest in a the new industry. They were desperate to keep the cost of production down.

Over the years, the electronic industry flourished, especially in Penang.

Some even tried to compare the Silicon Valley to Penang, but called it differently — as the "Silicon Island", perhaps, as a way to connote its success.

As more and more investors flocked to Penang and other parts of the country, many began to claim credit, but none was given to the Minah Karan.

Today, the term Minah Karan is no longer in vogue, although the inherent condescending attitude towards such workers still remains.

That the Minah Karan sacrificed so much in the early days was taken for granted.

Their ghetto-like accommodation, graveyard shifts, the dubious social status accorded to them, low wages and long hours were easily forgotten. Instead, they were told to be forever grateful.

As economic prosperity continued, Minah Karan were no more than just numbers that worked the machines.

Then another label, bohsia, appeared.

The victims were again young girls said to be in search of a good time and easy money and they seemingly had a way with (dirty?) old men.

Only signalling and gesturing were all that was needed; hence, the label, implying the "silent ones".

Like Minah Karan, more and more teenage girls were tarred with the bohsia label.

And like the Minah Karan too, the public was eager to use the label, at the slightest opportunity.

It did not matter if the label was inaccurate, or if person was wrongly accused.

Hardest hit were students who were used to coming back home late from schools because of their active involvement in school activities.

To make it worse, bohjan, the male equivalent, was quick to follow.

Many more were tarred with this new brush, as if the impact of the former was not bad enough.

How all these labels actually help to solve the social problems is still not clear.

What is certain, however, is that the moment the labels disappear from use in the public domain, interest about the issue also wanes.

No one questions where the bohsia ended up, though some are happy to pretend that the problem is no longer there.

Now it was time for another label, the Minah Rempit, and more dominantly, the Mat Rempit.

Apart from the different target population and context, everything else sounds very familiar, particularly, the labelling exercise.

The media frenzy is unmistakable, turning the label into an everyday word.

Not that it will solve the problem. If at all, it will worsen into a long-standing issue.

At one time, the choice was Mat Motor but since it did not make the problem go away, it was re-branded as Mat Rempit.

The motorcycle menace is more than 10 years old and the problem appears to be worsening, especially as we are building more and more straight and wider roads which can easily double up as race tracks.

Illegal street racing attracted even greater attention when Malaysia joined the prestigious Formula One club.

Motor racing became a kind of national passion, and like other sports, it triggered the corresponding responses.

You will remember that at the height of the badminton fever, fired up by the Thomas Cup, makeshift courts mushroomed. All it took were two people to hit a shuttlecock to and fro over some makeshift nets.

Similarly, during the World Cup season, youngsters took to the fields, adopting the names of their favourite footballer as they pretended to be the best among the rest.

Therefore, in the case of motor racing, one is tempted to argue why it should be any different, compounded by the national or international appeal attached to it.

Surely, it is bound to thrill young and impressionable minds who are forever seeking new challenges.

The only snag is that racing needs a "real" track as makeshift ones, especially public roads, are dangerous.

Public roads provide the most convenient and accessible alternative for the youth. No team is required, and the more the merrier.

Astride a motorcycle, they can race against time, and that is good enough for the thrill-seekers.

Violence has been associated with Mat Rempit, but generally violence is on the rise, even without them.

Just because someone thinks it is important to fix a label to some perceived undesirable target group, and turn them into convenient scapegoats, it does mean it is justified.

To keep the Mat Rempit off the streets needs more than just labelling them.

They need rehabilitating, but before this can happen we need to understand the sub-culture that breeds them and understand the deeper issues involved.

We tend to forget that Mat Rempit are youngsters in a "critical" period of their lives, and the labels contribute little to solving the problem, if at all.

This is already a complex issue and calling them this or that only exposes our insensitivity, and it doesn't help the Mat Rempit.

This name-calling and labelling is demeaning and creates a "them" and "us" situation.

Labelling someone "Mat" this and "Mat" that is also inappropriate, considering that "Mat" is a variant for "Ahmad" or "Muhammad" which has a far noble meaning — "the trustworthy one" or "the praiseworthy one".

The bottomline is if we are keen in helping to solve the problem, we could for a start avoid name-calling for it only complicates the situation further.

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